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Life and Public Services of
General John Wolcott Phelps.

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Life and Public Services

OF

GEN. JOHN WOLCOTT PHELPS

A SKETCH READ BEFORE

The N. E. Historic Genealogical Society

BY

CECIL HAMPTON CUTTS HOWARD

DEC. 1, 1886.

BRATTLEBORO, VT.
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24

To John Phelps

The only descendant of the subject of this
sketch, this little tribute is

Dedicated.

PREFACE.

It is customary to offer a brief apology to the public, when presenting them a sketch of this kind. In this case it is not necessary. Those who knew the late General Phelps, will realize how difficult it would be to present more of his life than is here given. He was reticent in regard to his private life for fear of being misunderstood.

This sketch is simply a token of esteem from one who knew him well.

The author has a keen realization of its imperfections, and has only been induced to put it in print that there might be some tangible token of his life, and that all might realize how much one man can accomplish, with persistent, well directed endeavor.

He can only trust that this may be but the forerunner of a larger volume at some future time,

when the history of the day shall be better understood.

The author's thanks are due to General J. W. de Peyster, for the use of valuable correspondence between himself and General Phelps, also to General Rush C. Hawkins, John Britton, Clark and T. W. Idle for important suggestions.

CECIL HAMPDEN CUTTS HOWARD.

BROOKLYN, N. Y., April, 1887.

INDEX.

AMERICAN PARTY, THE	36
AMERICAN POLITICS	55
BENNINGTON, VT., DESCRIPTION OF . . .	47-48
BRATTLEBORO, VT., 11, 12, 15, 29, 39, 33, 34, 37, 47, 51.	
BROWNSVILLE, TEX., LIFE AT	12-13
BUTLER, GEN. B. F.	25, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32
CAMP FLOYD, U. T.	45-47, 55
CARROLLTON	17
CHERUBUSCO	12
CONTRERAS	12
DAVIS, MRS. ANNA B.	37
DAVIS, CAPT. R. S.	26
DE PEYSTER, GENERAL J. W.	45, 47, 51
DORCHESTER, MASS.	10
DREAMS, SIGNIFICANCE OF	35
EMERSON	33
FORT LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS	55
FORT PARAPET	17

FRANCHISE, REGULATION OF	57
"GOOD BEHAVIOR," ITS CHARACTER	34
GUILFORD CENTRE	10, 37, 51-54
HADLEY, MASS.	10
HALL, GOV. AND FAMILY	48
HAWKINS, GENERAL RUSH C.	18, 25, 39-41
HODDE, LUCIEN DE LA	33
JOHNSON, GENERAL	15
LINCOLN, PRESIDENT, 29-32; ADMINISTRATION OF, 56, 58.	
LOCHA HUTCHEE	11
MARLBOROUGH, VT.	10
MASONIC LODGE	36, 37, 56-58
NEGRO SOLDIERS, 26-28; PLAN TO ARM, 17; ARMING OF, 25, 29-30.	
NEW HAMPSHIRE GRANTS	11
NEWPORT NEWS	40
NEW ORLEANS, REDUCTION OF	14
OQIRRIH MOUNTAINS	46
PHELPS, MRS. ALMIRA LINCOLN	11
PHELPS, CHARLES	10
PHELPS, CHARLES, JR.	11

PHELPS, JOHN WOLCOTT, Ancestry of, 10-11; Education of, 10; Military training of, and Cherokee Indians, 11; European tour, 13; First book of, 13; Extracts from, 14; Account of the civil war by, 16-18; Emancipation of, 19-24; Letter of, to Davis, 26-28; Resignation accepted, 29; Return to Brattleboro, 29; Estimation of character of, 9, 39-41; "Cradle of Rebellions," translation of, 33; Description of residence of, 33-34; Second book of, extracts from, 34-35; Literary work of, 33-35; Presidential nominee, 36; Marriage of, 37; Lecture of, 37; Death of, 38; Letters, 45-54; Extracts from, 55-58.

PHELPS, JOHN	11
PHELPS, SOLOMON	10
PHELPS, TIMOTHY	10
PHELPS, WILLIAM	10
PORT HUDSON	17
RED RIVER	17
ROCKINGHAM	11
SANBORN, MR.	11
SHIP ISLAND	19

STANTON, SECRETARY	28
UTAH	15, 45-47
VERA CRUZ	12
VICKSBURG	17
WEST POINT	11
WEST TOWNSHEND	11

LIFE AND PUBLIC SERVICES
OF
GEN. JOHN WOLCOTT PHELPS.

IT has been truly said, "the world knows nothing of its greatest men." Of the late General J. W. Phelps, who as a soldier and author, gained but a partial recognition of his merits before his death, it is the most appropriate sentiment that could be uttered. Truly he was beloved by all who knew him well; esteemed throughout his circle of acquaintance for as great a nobility of character, and firmness of purpose, as the world has ever seen. Yet, ever through his life he was destined, by those self-same friends to be misunderstood in so many things, that his latter years were spent in seclusion, embittered by disappointments and the failure of many of his life projects.

Such characters are too great for all to define; we

feel their nobility, when we fail to grasp the reasons for their deeds, which are almost beyond our power of comprehension in the magnitude of their conception.

General John Wolcott Phelps was born in Guilford Centre, Vermont, November 13, 1813. Charles Phelps, his great grandfather, was a lineal descendant of William Phelps, one of the earliest settlers of Dorchester, Massachusetts, and who afterward removed to Windsor, Connecticut, where he became a prominent citizen of great influence, and Judge of the first circuit court ever held in that state.

Charles Phelps was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, and educated for the profession of law. He was afterward one of the earliest settlers of Hadley, Massachusetts. From there he removed to Marlboro (then a part of Cumberland County, New York, but soon to become a part of Vermont), and was the first lawyer to reside in the latter state.

Solomon and Timothy, two of his sons, went with him. The latter was made sheriff of Cumberland County, under the jurisdiction of New York, and

upheld the authority of that state in all the dispute and turmoil which rose in connection with the "New Hampshire grants." He had two sons, John and Charles, both lawyers. The latter settled in West Townshend, Vermont, the former in Guilford Centre, where his son, General Phelps, was born. General Phelps' mother was Miss Lucy Lovell, of Rockingham, of whose eight children General Phelps was the sole survivor. His step-mother was Mrs. Almira Lincoln, (the celebrated author and teacher), who had two children, both of whom are now living in Baltimore.

General Phelps' early education, like that of most New England boys, was received at the district schools. He was fitted for West Point, at a private school, kept by a Mr. Sanborn, in Brattleboro. Entering West Point in 1832, he graduated in 1836 with rank of second lieutenant.

As early as 1838, he distinguished himself for gallant conduct in the action at Locha Hutchee. After the war he was put in charge of the emigration to the West of the Cherokee Indians. To

quote his own words on the subject, he says, "I had always believed the Indians were more sinned against than sinning, and later in my life came to take up my pen in their behalf."

Many skirmishes in the South and in Canada occupied his time until the outbreak of the Mexican war. For two years he led a company, and was prominent in the battles of Vera Cruz, Contreras, and Churubusco.

For gallant conduct he was brevetted Captain, but declined to accept the nominal promotion until 1850, when he received a regular promotion.

For some years afterward, he was away from civilization, and had the hardest kind of border experiences. In a diary written later, while living in Brattleboro, Vermont, he says, "In the spring of 1852, I was obliged to leave Brownsville, Texas, because the government would not sustain me in my efforts to execute their orders for the suppression of filibustering attacks from our territory upon Mexico. It left me in the lurch among savages, whose cunning was exhausted in quiet, yet constant

efforts to destroy the government under which they lived. I went then to Europe, simply because I was not prepared to resign, having devoted my whole life singly to the service, and remained abroad one year."

While in Europe he visited many places of note, kept a diary of events, and on his return, he wrote and published anonymously a volume entitled "Sybilline Leaves." From this we quote the following poems, with which he opens and closes the volume, as partial illustrations of its character, the remainder of the volume being a gathering of brief, original thoughts, upon the visitation of a heathen temple.

DAY.

On such a day as this, so fair and bright,
All redolent with the breath of violets ;
While the gay summer cloud swims in the deep
Serenity above, and gleefully the wavelet
Laughs responsive from below ;
While songs of birds and city murmurs,
Blend with music of playful fountains,

And bright sunbeams flash their threads of gold,
Amidst leaves and flowers, and throw o'er all
A magic gauze, through which nature glances,
Like Beauty through her veil.
On such a day, O, God !
The gladdened soul, like the cloud in ether,
Swims in the joyous spirit of Thy works,
And thanks *Thee*, that it lives.

NIGHT.

And now again, 'tis night ; and such a night,
With her stars all bright,
Like jewelled princess, o'er whose dusky brow
The electric light doth catch and play,
As of emotions, deep and tremulous ;
Whilst the full rose sips at her dewy breath,
And opes the secret of a swelling heart ;
Whilst the moist earth doth teem with great joy
With all the promise of a fruitful year—
Sweet with the perfumes of myriad flowers
Gay with the fairy-lantern-fire-fly's light—
And plaintive with the song of whip-poor-will.
When loving hearts for the first time feel
The strange communion of this human life,
With the deep hid mysteries of the stars.

These poems, written at thirty-nine years of age, are undoubtedly the finest he ever composed, the later productions of his pen being more in the line of essays and papers.

In 1859, he resigned his commission, after having served awhile under General Johnson in the Utah Expedition, and returned to Brattleboro, having completed nearly twenty-three years of military service. Much of the intervening period, between his leaving the army and the outbreak of the war of the rebellion, was spent in writing articles against the aggression of the slave power.

We find him, then, at the commencement of the last war, possessed of the following requisite qualifications for success:

1st. An inheritance from five different ancestors of the highest legal acuteness and talent, which, combined with the personal study of law, gave him an analytical mind for expedients.

2nd. A military training of twenty-three years in active army life, with a knowledge and power of controlling men.

3d. A year devoted to personal observation in Europe of existing customs and special study, with a view to his own country's needs.

4th. Possessed of a character whose stern principles knew but one road by which to gain the end in view.

These, with eccentricity, gave him sufficient originality to do wonderful deeds. There was just such a man needed, and, as in other cases, the niche was filled in due time.

In a sketch of the war, written some years ago, General Phelps' modestly pens the following brief account of his services:

"At the outbreak of the civil war I volunteered my services to lead the first company of Vermont Volunteers, which, together with one regiment from Massachusetts and one from New York, under my command, took possession of the mouth of the James, thus securing that strategic point for the subsequent reduction of the Rebel Capital. From the mouth of the James I was ordered to the Southwest, where I occupied Ship Island with a brigade of New England volunteers, and subsequently took

part in the reduction of New Orleans. I garrisoned the fort near the mouth of the Mississippi, and was the first to enter the Custom House as the Citadel of New Orleans. I then took possession of the rebel works north of the city. The gun carriages of these works were still burning, having been set on fire previous to their falling into the hands of the government troops. The guns had been spiked, but New England ingenuity soon restored them to fighting order. At Carrollton, named by me "Fort Parapet," our camp was swarming with negroes, which the government commander was ordering to be returned to their masters. I began organizing slaves as soldiers. The reasons for this movement were these: First, men were wanted for holding the strategic points which had fallen into possession of the government at Vicksburg, Red River, Port Hudson, *et cetera*. Second, every slave, when made a soldier, not only could fire bullets at his old masters instead of supporting them in the Rebellion with his labor, but could help hold a strategic point. In short, there was every military reason in favor of the measure, and none against it. I was ordered, however, by the Government commander, to cease organizing negroes as troops, and to set them at work instead, cutting wood for market and other

labor. In reply to this, I decidedly refused to become a slave driver, and resigned my commission and returned to Vermont."

These words from his own pen depict his character forcibly. He could not do what his conscience forbade. Honor, wealth, and position were nothing, when compared with obeying the dictates of conscience. He was a man. He did what few men would have done.

In a sketch of General Phelps' life, written for the Annual Reunion, in 1885, of the West Point Military Academy, General Rush C. Hawkins writes as follows of the appearance of General Phelps in May, 1861, when he came into New York, en route south with his regiment:

"He was the living marching realization of one of the best of Cromwell's great captains, eager to crush out with his righteous wrath an institution which he hated with his whole soul; full of faith in the success of a good cause, brave, sturdy, serious and true. . . . A man for the times, but ahead of them, and in advance of others in seeing opportunities to accomplish great results, and with

adequate courage for taking advantage of them.
. . . . His emancipation proclamation, which he issued from Ship Island, was like a well-considered essay, on the relations of government and slavery, and the influence of the latter on the former."

That the links of his life-work may be made more perfect, we will give that wonderful document, although doubtless well known to most of our readers:—

HEADQUARTERS MIDDLESEX BRIGADE.

SHIP ISLAND, MISS., Dec. 4, 1861.

To the Loyal Citizens of the Southwest:

Without any desire of my own, but contrary to my private inclination, I again find myself among you as a military officer of the government. A proper respect for my fellow-countrymen renders it not out of place that I should make known to you the motives and principles by which my command will be governed. We believe that every state that has been admitted as a slave state into the union, since the adoption of the constitution, has been admitted in direct violation of that constitution. We believe that the slave states, which existed as such

at the adoption of our constitution, are, by becoming parties to that compact, under the highest obligations of honor and morality to abolish slavery. It is our conviction that monopolies are as destructive as competition is conservative of principles and vitalities of Republican government; that slave labor is a monopoly that excludes free labor and competition; the slaves are kept in comparative idleness and ease in the fertile half of our arable national territory, while free white laborers, constantly augmenting in numbers from Europe, are confined to the other half, and are often distressed by want; that the free labor of the North has more need of expansion into the Southern states, from which it is virtually excluded, than slavery had into Texas in 1846; that free labor is essential to free institutions; that these institutions are naturally better adapted and more congenial to the Anglo Saxon race than are despotic tendencies of slavery; and finally, that the dominant political principles of this North American Continent, so long as the Caucasian race continues to flow in upon us from Europe, must needs be those of free institutions and free government. Any obstructions to the progress of that form of government in the United States, must inevitably be attended with discord and war.

Slavery, from the condition of a universally recognized social and moral evil, has become at length a political institution, demanding political recognition. It demands rights to the exclusion and annihilation of those rights which are insured to us by the constitution, and we must choose between them which we will have, for we cannot have both. The constitution was made for free men, not for slaves. Slavery, as a social evil, might for a time be tolerated and endured, but as a political institution it becomes imperious and exacting, and controlling, like a dread necessity, all whom circumstances have compelled to live under its sway, hampering their action and thus impeding our national progress. As a political institution, it could exist as a co-ordinate part only of two forms of government, viz.: the despotic and the free; and it could exist under a free government only where public sentiment in the most unrestricted exercise of a robust freedom, leading to extravagance and licentiousness, had swayed the thoughts and habits of the people beyond the bounds and limit of their own constitutional provision. It could exist under a free government only where the people, in a period of unreasoning extravagance, had permitted popular clamor to overcome public reason, and had

attempted the impossibility of setting up permanently, as a political institution, a social evil which is opposed to moral law.

It behooves us to consider as a self-governing people, bred, reared, and practiced in the habits of self-government, whether we cannot, whether we ought not, to revolutionize slavery out of existence, without the necessity of a conflict of arms, like that of the French revolution. Indeed, we feel assured that the moment slavery is abolished, from that moment our southern brethen,—every ten of whom probably have some relation at the North,—would begin to emerge from a hateful delirium. From that moment, relieved from imaginary terrors, their days become happy, and their nights peaceful and free from alarm; the aggregate amount of labor under the new stimulus of fair competition, becomes greater day by day; property rises in value, invigorating influences succeeds to stagnation, degeneracy and decay; and union, harmony and peace—to which we have so long been strangers—become restored, and bind us again in the bonds of amity, and friendship, as when we first began our glorious national career under one government of 1789. Why do the leaders of the Rebellion seek to change the form of our ancient government? Is it because

the growth of the African element of your population has come at length to render a change necessary? Will you permit the free government under which you have thus far lived, and which is so well suited for the development of true manhood, to be beaten to a narrow and belittling despotism, in order to adapt it to the necessities of ignorant slaves, the requirements of their proud and aristocratic owners? Will the laboring men of the South bend their neck to the same yoke that is fitted to the neck of the slave? We think not. We may safely answer that the time has not arrived when our southern brethren, for the mere sake of keeping Africans in slavery, will abandon their long cherished institutions and enslave themselves. It is a conviction of my command as a part of the National forces of the United States, that labor, — manual labor — is inherently noble; that it cannot be systematically degraded by any nation, without mining its peace, happiness, and power; that free labor is the granite basis on which free institutions must rest; that it is the right, the capital, the inheritance, the hope of the poor man everywhere; that it is especially the right of five millions of our fellow-countrymen, in the slave states, as well as of four millions of Africans there; and all our efforts there, whether

small or great, whether directed against the interference of governments abroad, or against rebellious combinations at home, shall be for free labor. Our motto and our standard shall be here and everywhere, and on all occasions, "Free labor, and working men's rights." It is on this basis, and on this basis alone, that our munificent government—the asylum of the nations—can be perpetuated and preserved.

J. W. PHELPS.

Brigadier General Volunteers Commanding."

A document of this nature was sure to be misunderstood. We have in it the embodiment of his life's experience as well as of his years' study and thought while abroad; an appeal to all classes of citizens, which was answered in various ways. He expended all his literary talent in the construction of it, and to what purpose? The people (many of them) thought him insane. Now he gains daily credit for a broad and expansive mind. "His works do live after him." That at that time it was unfavorably commented upon, and severely criticized, we can well imagine. The south offered rewards for the head of the man who had written the offending pa-

per. To quote from General Hawkins' sketch,

"No one knew better than General Phelps, that in his subordinate position he had no right to commit the Government to the carrying out of his particular ideas of what was right, or to the public adoption of this or that policy in relation to dealing with slavery or any other great question.

He did, however, believe that he had a right to speak to 'the loyal citizens of the south-west,' to whom his manifesto was addressed; and also to influence and stimulate his command, to the putting forth its best exertions in eliminating from the face of the earth, an accursed institution which he knew was a great blot upon our nationality. What he did was only a little in advance of the Government, and as it turned out, he was only a proto martyr to a great event (the arming of the slaves), in the interests of a few millions of God's creatures."

On May 23, 1862, General Butler wrote General Phelps as follows: "General, you will cause all unemployed persons, black and white, to be excluded from your lines. You will not permit either black or white persons to pass your lines." Parton, in his life of General Butler, says that General Phelps

was struck with horror at the command, but obeyed it, and removed the fugitives to a shelter just above his lines, where they lived upon the bounty of the soldiers who generously shared their rations with them. June 16, 1862, General Phelps addressed to Captain R. S. Davis, General Butler's acting assistant adjutant General, a communication of which General Hawkins says, "It has immortalized its author, and has no peer in the whole range of the rebellion literature. Neither Garrison, nor Phillips, nor Whittier, ever made a more pathetic, eloquent, or convincing appeal in the interests of the slave, than this."

It will, no doubt, stand throughout ages to come, as a monument to his unceasing labor for the down-trodden race. As an illustration of the style and scope of the whole, we quote the following paragraph

"There are of that, four millions of our colored subjects, who have no king or chief, nor in fact any government that can secure to them the simplest natural rights. They cannot be even entered into

treaty stipulations with, and deported to the East, as our Indian tribes have been to the West. They have no right to the mediation of a justice of the peace, or jury between them and chains and lashes. They have no right to wages for their labor; no right to the Sabbath; no right to the institution of marriage; no right to letters, or to self-defense. A small class of owners rendered unfeeling, and even unconscious and unreflecting by habit, and a large part of them ignorant and vicious, stand between them and their government, destroying its sovereignty. This government has not the power even to regulate the number of lashes that its subjects may receive. It cannot say that they shall receive thirty-nine instead of forty. To a large and growing class of its subjects, it can secure neither justice, moderation, nor the advantages of Christian religion, and if it cannot protect *all* its subjects, it can protect none, either black or white."

Speaking of how political education is shaped almost entirely to the interests of slavery, and how it must be corrected, he says;

"We are not without example and precedents in the history of the past. The enfranchisement of

the people of Europe, has been and is still going on through the instrumentality of military service; and by this means our slaves might be raised in the scale of civilization, and prepared for freedom. . . . Fifty Regiments might be raised among them at once, which could be employed in this climate to preserve order and thus prevent the necessity of retrenching our liberties as we should do by a large army composed exclusively of whites. For it is evident that a considerable army of whites would give stringency to our government, while an army, partly of blacks, would naturally operate in favor of freedom, and against those influences which at present most endanger our liberties. At the end of five years they could be sent to Africa, and their places filled with new enlistments."

On June 18, General Butler forwarded a copy of this letter to Secretary Stanton, with one of his own, in which he says: "General Phelps, I believe, intends making this a test case (referring to making soldiers of slaves who had escaped) for the policy of the government. I wish it might be so, for the difference of our action upon this subject is a source of trouble. I respect his honest sincerity of opinion, but, I am a soldier, bound to carry out the wishes of

my government so long as I hold its commission, and I understand that policy to be one I am pursuing. I do not feel at liberty to pursue any other. If the policy of the government is nearly that I have sketched in my report upon this subject, that which I have ordered in this department, then the services of General Phelps are worse than useless here. If the views set forth in his report are to obtain, then, he is invaluable, for his whole soul is in it, and he is a good soldier of large experience, and no braver man lives."

June 30, General Phelps, having heard nothing from the war department to the contrary, made a formal requisition for arms, etc., for three negro Regiments. On July 31, General Butler issued an order authorizing General Phelps to employ negroes instead in cutting trees to make abatis.

On September 8, he received notice that his resignation, which he had previously sent in, was accepted, and he returned to Brattleboro.

President Lincoln, who had really a very high estimation of the character and military skill of General Phelps, shortly after, ordered made out and

tendered to him a Major General's commission, or commander-in-chief of black troops, when a few months after the General's resignation, the plan at first presented by him, of arming negroes was adopted. Although several prominent Vermont citizens waited upon him to urge that he should accept it, and went to Washington with General Phelps, he declined, for President Lincoln would not accede to some things which he considered important. General Phelps wished the new commission to date from the time of his resignation. This President Lincoln did not do; hence the return of General Phelps to Brattleboro.

General Phelps' love of army life, his long service in the same, and every surrounding circumstance combined, made him resent President Lincoln's proposition. It gave him no credit for previous service, and he could not honorably consent to losing any part of the credit due to him for the long time spent in active army life. That, after his long labor to bring about the organization of negro troops, it should have come after his resignation,

seemed to embitter him toward the whole world in general, but especially towards President Lincoln. His estimation of the latter was at times severe and bitter. He felt that he had not had justice. His faith, when once shaken, was not easily restored. In the second, and by far the most important period of his life, that covered by his part in the rebellion, we find he did not disappoint those who knew how much talent he had. He wanted to suppress war, if possible, without resort to arms, and to that end he wrote his emancipation proclamation and his famous letter to General Butler. These brought him into an unpleasant attitude with all, for few then understood his motives, or thought how far he was in advance of his time.

When in this peculiar position of *apparent* disregard of the officer in command, finding that the government thought he had over-stepped the bounds of his authority, he resigned.

When soon after, the realization of his views came about, and President Lincoln offered him a new commission, we find him still an adherent to his

former principles, declining to return. It is difficult without access to private diaries of his own, to form a correct estimate of his views on the subject. We know now, after a lapse of twenty-five years, that to his influence in no small degree, through his efforts to organize colored troops, we owe an earlier close of the war. It is doubtful if the value of even that one service to his country can be estimated. Both he and Lincoln have passed to the land beyond, and ours is not the task of condemning Lincoln's course in the matter.

Undoubtedly he might have kept General Phelps in the army, if he had chosen to see how much he had accomplished. No one who read his proclamation and letter to which we have previously referred, could doubt the value of the views therein expressed. General Butler, in a letter to the executive department, commends its "clear and business-like statements;" only disallowing that any suggestion or authorization of it came from him. There was a general misunderstanding in regard to General Phelps' motive in the matter, and no one could or

would, clear it up. His return to Brattleboro, found him at fifty years of age, thrown upon his pen for companionship, for truly has Emerson said,

“ To be great 'is to be misunderstood,”

and he feared further intimate companionship with man might bring him more of life's bitterness.

Time and talent were his in abundance, and his tastes for literary pursuits, soon brought forth many efforts. The first of prominence to be published, was a work which he translated from the French, on Secret Societies, entitled “The Cradle of Rebellions,” by Lucien de la Hodde. That was published in 1864, but few ever knew who was the translator. His study was his earthly paradise. For nearly twenty years after his retirement from the army, he lived in a quaint old house on Asylum Street, in Brattleboro, Vermont. Winding walks in front of the house led some distance under shade trees before the house was reached. The piazza skirted the front and one side of the house, which on the further end was finished by a bay-window. Entering, we find a staircase on the left hand side of the hall, and two

doors on the right hand, leading respectively into the drawing-room and parlor. In every room the long windows opened out on the piazza beyond, and the good taste of the owner had furnished them very simply. Opening out from the parlor was his study, lighted by the wide bay-window, over which clustering vines hung all summer long. Around him on every side were the books, over the collection of which he had spent so many years. Beyond, through the window, Mt. Wantastiquet and the village street were ever present.

In summer and fall it was his delight to treat the children with the pears and apples which grew on his garden trees.

It was before he left this home that he wrote his volume entitled "Good Behavior." The work was intended as a text book for schools, and was adopted later in St. Louis and other cities. The chief aim in writing this, was his idea that children should be taught politeness and good manners in school as well as at home, thereby insuring to all a knowledge and practice of the rules of good breeding, which are often

unwittingly broken, and obviating many of the difficulties which arise therefrom in the lives of so many public school pupils. We quote from the book the following sentences, as partial illustrations of its character:

“ Conversation is a reflex of character, let us therefore cultivate a tone of mind, and a habit of life, the betrayal of which need not put us to shame in the company of the pure and wise; and the rest will be easy.”

“ True politeness has been defined to be benevolence in little things. We are not to be polite because we wish to please, but, because we wish to consider the feelings of others; because, in a word, we desire to carry into every act of our daily life, the spirit and practice of that religion which commands us to ‘do unto others as we would they should do unto us.’ The first lesson taught young sovereigns should be the respect and kindly regard which they owe each other.”

For many years General Phelps was President of the Vermont State Teachers’ Association, and also a leading officer of “ The Vermont Historical Society.”

Besides the three works mentioned of his published in early life, he wrote a brief description of the Island of Madagascar, which was published in the Irving Library in 1883, a year and a half before his death. He contributed largely to various literary and scientific periodicals, among them *The Century*, *The Christian Union*, and *The Independent*.

Believing that the Masonic Lodge was the cause of many of the country's evils, he was always opposed to Secret Societies of every kind. His prominence in the matter, led to his becoming the nominee for President of "The American Party," in the election of 1880. Probably never before or since has there been so much thought compressed into little space, as when he wrote to the writer of this paper upon that subject. From a letter dated September 30, 1882, we quote the following:

"There is but one alternative in the relation which the American people stand before the Masonic Lodge; their silence towards it shows either contempt or fear. But as the lodge is altogether

too powerful to be despised, there remains as the only motive for silence that of fear. It is indeed true, that our republican government is under duress to this foreign institution."

This tersely written sentence gives an exact idea of his feelings on the subject. His temperament was such that he could not stand idly by when anything arose to claim his attention, as being wrong or unjust. He never disguised his sentiments, but was always open and frank in regard to his convictions. His friends honored especially that phase of his character.

In 1883, he married Mrs. Anna B. Davis, and soon after became a permanent resident of Guilford. Previous to this he sold his home in Brattleboro, and traveled a short time. He was very active in the public affairs of Guilford, and kept up his literary activity as well. He was an earnest advocate of the metric system, and the week before his death, delivered a highly interesting and instructive lecture upon that subject.

Not the least among his literary abilities, was

his art of letter writing. A reader of character could discern a great deal of material for careful study within each page. His love for poetry was especially well and most often portrayed in them. Also his ardent love of nature.

In person, General Phelps was of commanding presence, about six feet in height, with a well developed, powerful frame, and dignified bearing. He was a man of deep religious feeling, and strongly attached to his church.

Fond of young people, his face framed in snowy beard and hair, with the light of a genial countenance radiating therefrom, will never be effaced from the memory of his friends.

He passed away peacefully in his sleep, during the night of February 1. 1885, leaving his wife and an infant son to survive him. How apropos are some lines of his own in connection with his life and death:

“ Let us reflect, though sorely tried
‘Neath cold, intemp’rate skies,
Yet on drear winter’s farther side
A pleasant summer lies.”

His last acts the night before his death, were typical of the man. An unsealed letter to his absent wife, and his Greek testament opened to where he had read before retiring. No more truthful estimate could be given of his character than that written by General Rush C. Hawkins, to *The New York Times*, on hearing of his death, which reads as follows:

“General John W. Phelps of Vermont, whose death was announced in your paper this morning, was one of the most notable officers of the army. He was an accomplished soldier of the highest and best type, a patriotic citizen with an unblemished reputation, a scholar well versed in mathematics, science, history, theology, several of the dead and four or five of the living languages.

As a soldier, he was all that the best authorities demand, and even more, for it might be said of him that he possessed an inner sense of duty which no written formula could prescribe. It was his faithful care, intelligence, and attention to his whole duty as commanding officer, and above all his example of indefatigable industry, which made his command one of the best disciplined, best drilled,

and most efficient in the whole army. He was not much of a believer in the extra unofficial—off duty—dress parade business, which to many officers who were mere *poseurs*, seemed to be of so very much importance. Neither was he a martinet, he had the rare good sense to accept the volunteer army for exactly what it was. He weighed its defects, and measured its virtues, and governed the performance of his duties accordingly. He knew he could trust its patriotic sense of duty and intelligence to imitate a good example, and its willingness to follow where it could not be driven; and there never was a commanding officer more implicitly obeyed, or more confidently trusted.

It was my good fortune to have been ordered to his command at Newport News, Virginia, soon after the breaking out of the rebellion in 1861. When I reported to him with my regiment, I was given to understand that we were engaged in a most serious undertaking, involving as it did the national life, and that we could only hope to overcome our foes by taking advantage of all our resources (he was the first to urge the organization of Negro troops), and moulding our raw material into a well-disciplined army; that the accomplishment of the latter was the immediate work in hand; and work he made of

it, such as many of us had never dreamed of before; but we saw the necessity for labor, and the good sense involved in his orders and criticisms, and all worked with a will, officers and men, to reward the great industry of a commander who had won our affection, admiration, and deep respect.

We went to him as children go to a school, and left him after three month's tuition, a thoroughly well-disciplined regiment, of whose after record he was justly proud.

To that kind hearted, quaint, honest old man, with his perfect sense of justice, the officers and men of my regiment owe a debt of gratitude, which can only be effaced from their memories, when the last survivor of that command shall have passed away.

This little statement, inadequate as it is, is the tribute I bring to the grave of an honored friend of a quarter of a century. I could not do less; I wish I could do more. Take him for all in all, I have never known a man so free from the hypocrisies, sins and vices, which make humanity so despicable, as was John W. Phelps.

NEW YORK, Feb. 3, 1885."

If his public and military career were strong, what can we say of his private life? It was certainly no

less characteristically so, and full of an earnest zeal for his country's good. From the time he resigned, and commenced translating that work "The Cradle of Rebellions," to which his mind would naturally revert at that period, until his death, his life was expended for others. Pen and example were daily wielded with power, in favor of the good, the true, and the beautiful. His means? Ah, there is the secret! His extreme love of children, his under-current (at times very strong) of quaint humor, his chivalric devotion and courtesy to woman, and his deep religious principle, these were some of the ways in which he wielded a power for good. His life was made up of quiet working for others, self ever last.

After a personal acquaintance with him from childhood, the writer is glad to add this tribute to the few already written; conscious only that his life can never be fully estimated, in the length and breadth of its greatness. It is only a sketch at best of the life work of a wonderfully gifted man. History will accord him his place. Years must add their weight of testimony ere he can be appreciated.

APPENDIX.

LETTERS.

[To General J. W. de Peyster.]

CAMP FLOYD, U. T., July 30, 1859.

MY VERY DEAR GENERAL:—Salutation, health and peace! Day awakes from the slumbers of the night; puts forth her rosy fingers sparkling with the morning star like the Turkish maiden with diamond ring; brushes away the crimson cloud curtains from the orient, and looks out in beauty upon the quiet world. . . . The sun is now up, throwing a flood of light over the barren land; and the rough scabrous mountain peaks respond with a lorn desolate smile, as if an angel had alighted there, and was looking down upon us in serious yet benevolent contemplation.

The streaks of cloud that flock the sky here and there, are moving onward with their silent, noiseless flow,—onward ever from the south-west, like a mighty stream bearing the vapors of the Pacific to our eastern lands.

Having shed down their rain to fertilize your fields—having emptied their buckets quite, the dry

stream moves onward out upon the Atlantic where it again becomes filled with water, which it pours out upon the lands of the old world. It returns as a trade wind by the way of the tropics, is deflected to the north and then to the north-east, and thus keeps up its circulation like an immense irrigating wheel, alternately filling its buckets in the oceans, and emptying them upon the land—a machinery that never falters, and never needs repair,—as eternal as the globe itself.

Out of my door are seen the Oquirrh mountains, lifting their majestic outlines against the sky, like a beautiful picture of the earth delineated upon the heavens. Amidst the dark green vegetation that encircles their summit like a garland, is still perceived one small spot of snow. . . . One of the most frail and delicate flowers that I ever saw, is so frail that it seeks protection from the grease-wood, a small shrub from amidst which it grows, and whose branches are so thorny that nothing can touch them without being stung. It is one of the funniest sights that I ever witnessed to see such a beautiful flower, conscious of its attractions and its frailty, seeking shelter and safety from such an ill-natured shrub as the grease-wood. This shrub receives its name from the fact that when thrown up-

on the fire, it flashes up like grease; but it is not so much from any greasy quality, I think, as from an irascible temper, acquired from its long struggle to maintain a precarious foot-hold in the desert, and which exhibits itself in thorn and flames.

The absorbing topic of interest with us at present is the mule sale. Persons go to the auction as the chief place of amusement. From this you can judge to what a low pass we have been brought.

With sentiments of the highest esteem and affectionate regard, I am very truly your humble and obedient servant,

J. W. PHELPS.

[To General J. W. de Peyster.]

BRATTLEBORO, VT., Dec. 18, 1859.

DEAR GENERAL:—I passed the night in Troy; had the pleasure of seeing my nieces at the Seminary, and left next morning for Bennington. This town is at the foot of the western slope of the Green mountains. Black clouds were enveloping the tops of these mountains when I arrived—just such as in July and August used to lie there growling down at my native place like a lion, of a hot afternoon. How terrible they used to look before

they leaped down on the valleys of the Connecticut!—but how bright and beautiful with the bow of promise, bird music, and glittering drops, as they swept on and gradually retired from the view! My heart throbbed as a child to its mother's on seeing them again. Though they looked cold and dark, yet they were warm when compared with the coldness of the man-world. And when the next morning dawned, cold and clear—what another spectacle was there not presented!—a scene of brightness more beautiful, if possible, than that of the retiring, bow-spanned summer storm! The clouds had left a hoar frost upon the woods with which the mountains are covered, and under the rising sun they were glittering like some huge fancy work, frosted with pearls and diamonds. It seemed as if nature had dropped her Christmas ring there.

I spent a good part of the day of arrival with Governor Hall, an old acquaintance both of my father and self. The Republican simplicity and neatness of his household, and the bearing of his family, fairly charmed me.

Believe me, my friend, there is no state in this world like Vermont. The beautiful theories of sages, poets and philosophers, here meet with all the fruition that it is possible for such flowers to at-

tain to in this world. One fears here neither the frowns of the rich nor the curse of the poor, but sees always medium condition of independence and ease.

The next day, in a two-horse sleigh, we set out for the journey over the mountains. The ascent was easy—along the banks of a brawling brook, choked and hoarse with anchor ice, and I walked nearly to the top. We reached the summit level—1800 feet or so above the Hudson—at about night-fall, and then, the driver giving the whip to his little Vermont horses, down we plunged at a gallop. The sleighing was good and the road smooth, bordered with fir trees and scattered along with houses. The stars were burning like diamonds, and the cold hill-tops above us, tinged at their summit with the last saffron of the dying day, seemed looking wistfully toward the departing sun as if fearful of being left cold and uncovered through the keen, frosty night. It was bitter cold, but there was a freshness and beauty in the scene that exhilarated one, as if he had got up among the nectarine and ambrosial drinks of the gods. The sombre firs waft their censers to you as you pass in among the aisles of this eternal temple of freedom, and the Deerfield hails you with his multitudinous roar.

Arriving at Wilmington about half past eight o'clock, P. M., we stopped for the night. We found ourself amidst the same scenes that we had often witnessed thirty years ago, viz.: a bar-room filled with villagers and a few travellers—only there is no drinking now. The shrine is there—the bar, but the *spirit* is fled—exorcised by the law! The talk was, as it had been in the inns along the route where we had stopped to warm, of John Brown; of crowding in with free labor into Northern Virginia, to take the place of the negroes who will be sent off to the south; of railroad accidents, etc. Bills were being posted up, announcing Christmas festivals, and there was a talk of several bears having been killed in the vicinity of late years. The appearance of a bear there twenty years ago would have been regarded as something extraordinary, but I suppose that the constant drain of the Vermont population to the west has given the denizens of the woods a respite and chance to grow.

The next morning at four o'clock we renewed the journey, and arrived at this place about 8 o'clock, A. M. It was exceedingly cold.

Devotedly yours,

WOLCOTT PHELPS.

[To General J. W. de Peyster.]

BRATTLEBORO, VT., DEC. 26, 1859.

MY DEAR GENERAL:—

Yours of the 18th inst. came into my hands day before yesterday morning, at a time when I was preparing to spend Christmas in my native place.

Towards the hour of sunset, I started to walk out on foot, but one of the young men of the town,—a son of an old acquaintance, overtook me on the way; and it seemed to be the greatest era of his life, and the highest pleasure that he had ever enjoyed, to have me in his cutter with him. And as it turned out, he was a proper exponent of the feelings of all, old and young, from the oldest man down to the youngest girl. At least so I judged from their expressions of kindness and welcome to me.

Even the hills, trees and other inanimate objects, though buried in snow under a cold sky, seemed to smile upon me, as they might on some disembodied spirit that still lingered around them; for indeed I am disembodied of all that I once was. But it was strange that I should have been so warmly received. Never before has the moral world thrown such a warmth of expression over the physical world around me, for even the beauties of nature scoff at a wounded heart.

All the energy and enterprise—almost all the young men, have flown away, like water from a mountain pond, from my native town during the last thirty years, leaving the old men and girls at home. Of the latter, not a few have become old maids, and the air of tranquility and repose that pervades the once busy scene, is intense not to say lorn. It was already dark on Christmas eve, when I approached the church—Christ's church, where my moral being was first nurtured, and which is one of the most picturesque edifices that I ever saw.

Upon an elevated site, amidst the noiseless quiet of the peaceful village, beneath the calm and stillness of a winter's twilight, that church was all lit up by an illumination, and was throwing its light out upon the pure, cold snows, as if on some extraordinary bridal feast—that of earth and heaven. It was as bright and cheery as the effulgence of music that announced peace and good will to men over the hills of Bethlehem. It was a strange sight—there where all was so still and lorn, to see the vestal light of religious truth kept so brightly burning, for ever since that little fane has been erected there, now near half a century, it has thus glowed on every Christmas eve, in celebration of the advent of our Saviour. Yet it seemed a strange sight as I saw it

then, and I really wish that you might have seen it too. But still it might not have interested you much.

The bell was calling the villagers in, and I entered and took a seat—with an old soldier of the war of 1812 (I think a Captain), and his family,—old friends of *my* family as long as I can remember. Though the town has long been on the decline, the church was nearly full on this occasion. It was handsomely decorated with evergreen, with the star in the east, with appropriate mottoes, etc., and the choir, made up of fine looking young men and young women, had arranged their part of the exercises well. My father used to write a hymn for the choir on this occasion in years past. The clergyman's name is Ethan Allen. What a crowd of reminiscences thronged around my half melting heart! There were the walls, the windows, the tables of law and love on the right and left of the altar, upon which the eyes of so many of my friends had rested, who are now slumbering in dust. The grave-yard, where I saw the first corpse laid, is now full. Of my own family, consisting of eleven persons, only three remain, but in their place were eyes and lips as bright as theirs.

After the service, came a half hour of mutual greeting, and I must confess, General, that the ap-

parent respect, esteem and confidence of the girls, with their warm bright eyes, and throbbing hearts, was the richest treat that I ever had in my life. I spent the night with the old soldier. He, his wife and a grown daughter and myself, sat down to a small supper-table, and talked over old times till late into night till that hour of Christmas eve, when, according to the traditions received and believed in our youth, the cattle kneeled in their mangers. . . . On Christmas day I again attended church, dined with another old friend, who has looked out from a position of primitive simplicity—from a pedestal of granite, as it were, upon almost all the political changes that have taken place with us, during the period of our national existence, and when the sun began to kiss the cold puritanical hills of the west, I commenced my return to my lodgings. . . .

I could not, and perhaps *should* not tell you of all the deep emotions that have been stirred by this Christmas, for they might appear weak and foolish.

With renewed good wishes, enriched this time with all the tender reminiscences of a happy Christmas, I wish you many happy New Years, and am,

Brotherly yours,

WOLCOTT PHELPS.

EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS.

“Do not dreams at night sometimes foreshadow the coming of letters, or the condition our friends may be in, either good or bad? It is strange that two powerfully excited batteries may convey intelligible influences along the wires; and it is not more so, perhaps, that sympathetic hearts should communicate with each other along the rays of the sun, or the stars. What angels may not stand by us as telegraphists!”

FORT LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS, June, 18, 1857.

“It appears to me that there is a strong resemblance between our American politics and drugged whiskey; the effect being first to make men foolish, and then flat, and finally delirious.”

CAMP FLOYD, U. T. April 20, 1859.

“Under no circumstances can I ever regret having left the service. If you can conceive any process by which the leopard could change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin, you can inform me

how I could become reconciled to the service in its present condition. It is in the hands of a feeble section, and the weakness, passion, whim, and violence are felt like neuralgic pains."

WEST CHESTER, PA. NOV. 11, 1859.

"Lincoln's administration was so completely under the control of the Lodge, and the Lodge through that administration has become so solidly established in power, that it seems at times almost impossible to wrest the affairs of the country from its grasp, and restore them to a sound American condition."

Dec. 1877.

"Masonry is a Pagan parody on the Christian religion, and that the American people, of all people in the world, should drop the religion and take up the parody, is one of the most humbling facts against humanity that I know of."

Dec. 1876.

"When the poor man makes himself a link in a secret organization, he forms a chain to bind himself to servitude. He must move and work as the rich man directs."

"Under the rule of the Lodge, one finds himself worse off than to be in a foreign country, for there he would be allowed the consideration of being an

American, while here in Vermont, a real American not a Mason, is treated as the Chinese are in San Francisco, as a foreigner. The Lodge is giving us a government that is no more American, than Islamism would be."

June 27, 1878.

"I think that we Americans ought to restore the old Whig party. It has the odor of respectability about it; is of historic value, and is the party of liberal ideas in England. What we need is a party to hold the balance between the Democrats and Republicans, both of which are exceedingly depraved. It is well known that the best element of the Republican party is the Whig element."

June 27, 1878.

"All evils link themselves together in an endless chain, part of which runs in one direction, and part in another, just as all good things link themselves together."

"It was during the war that the franchise should have been regulated. When American patriots were moving the wheels of government with their blood, then was the time for securing the benefits of the Republic to Americans.

March. 1879.

“ If the ten commandments were put into the Constitution, it would give them no sanction, and they would communicate no virtue to the Constitution. Religion is a personal matter, between the individual and his maker, and his Constitution is the Bible. If men are religious, the Constitution will take care of itself. If they are *not* religious, constitutions are of no account.”

“ Lincoln’s administration neither hung rebels, nor insisted on the abolition of slavery, both of which are necessary to the life of the Constitution. He simply followed the flood of the people, forgetting that the Constitution was as much the voice of the people, as their vote of to-day.”

“ I met the average New Englander, yesterday, and supposed from his general bearing that he was a non Mason. The steel and flint immediately struck fire between us, and he told me plainly that as I had never entered the Lodge, I could not possibly know anything about it. And when I answered that I could never join an institution without knowing something about it, his coat of mail did not seem to be pierced by it.”

MAY, 1878.

“ We must have men in office who will not play parts.”

947

